

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 18
Issue 1 *Special Issue on The Legacy of
Althusser*

Article 4

1-1-1994

Literature in the Abstract: Althusser and English Studies in England

David Margolies
Goldsmiths' College, University of London

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Margolies, David (1994) "Literature in the Abstract: Althusser and English Studies in England," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1336>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Literature in the Abstract: Althusser and English Studies in England

Abstract

Althusser's work arrived just when the disintegrating liberal consensus was shaking the ivory towers of the university. Students protested the war in Vietnam as well as the policies of the university. Althusser offered an understanding of this corrupt world and its distorted self-image. These theories provided an exciting new totalization in which life had meaning and intellectuals, a vital role. In literary studies, students and lecturers assumed that works of literature were anti-scientific, preservers of the status quo, without genuine knowledge. Disillusioned, these students and lecturers condemned Literature as an institution and ignored the individual work. To stop teaching the dominant ideology, they found redemption through abstraction—general principles, abstract structures. Academics found it attractive to raise barricades in the mind, not the street. Althusserian ideas showed lecturers and students that what was thought to be a purely literary or factual matter of aesthetic appreciation was really ideological and political, but the arrogance of the Althusserians, who recognized no theory before Althusser and no value in empirical experience, offended potential allies.

Keywords

Althusser, Marxist philosophy, self-image, corruption, meaning, intellect, academics, mind, aesthetic

Literature in the Abstract: Althusser and English Studies in England

David Margolies
Goldsmiths' College, University of London

The work of Althusser arrived in England in the wake of 1968, the *annus mirabilis* for countless students and academics whose world was going through extraordinary change and in which the traditional points of orientation had disappeared. The liberal consensus was disintegrating in an unprecedented public recognition that governments told lies—not just euphemisms or conventional denials of espionage, but fabrications of whole processes of events and complete misrepresentations of their actions at home as well as in the far-flung corners of the globe. The ivory towers of the universities were shaken, and even the English departments which had so long viewed the world from far above the struggle, were starting to experience upheaval of their own. When the English translation of *Pour Marx* appeared in 1969, Althusser provided a pattern in which this vague movement seemed coherent and nameless forces were given a name. Rarely has the solution arrived so close to the problem. The moment of the arrival of Althusser's work in England could not have been better timed for maximum influence.

The events of 1968 had been more immediately and obviously political than the later struggles over ideology. 1968 was the year of Paris, where students took to the streets, built barricades, and fought off the riot police. It was the year of Prague Spring, where the flowering of popular socialist democracy in Czechoslovakia was brutally crushed by the tanks of the Soviet Union's "real existing socialism." It was the year of the Pentagon, where unprecedented numbers of Americans marched on the symbolic centre of American military might to demand an end to their country's genocidal war against Vietnam. This march was led by two of the country's best known literary figures, Robert Lowell and Norman Mailer. It was also the year of Grosvenor Square, where, in front of the U.S. Embassy in London, thousands of demonstrators against America's war in Vietnam were attacked by police who had been instructed by their officers that there was no need to be too restrained. And it was the year of the Chicago Police riot, where, in full view of the television cameras transmitting the Democratic Convention to the homes of America, crowds of peaceful anti-war demonstrators and mere observers were attacked by uncontrolled heavily armed police. Millions of viewers had never before seen anything like it. All

over the world the behaviour of governments was seen to be, not just brutal, but unprincipled, mendacious, and thoroughly corrupt. The supposed defenders of order, in addition to bending the institutions of justice, also managed to twist its principles: official ideology was rotten through and through.

An explanation was needed, something free from the lies and prevarications of corrupt governments and something also that explained how, until that moment, those lies had, almost unnoticed, been perpetrated on the people. Enter Althusser. Althusser offered an understanding of the corrupt world and its distorted self-image. But it was more than that; his theories had the excitement of a totalization, something where all the pieces fell into place and in which all life had meaning. And, for students, this exciting new paradigm at last gave intellectuals a vital part to play (whereas most theories of the totality of human life had marginalized them, and Marxism in particular seemed to devalue their special intellectual attributes, allowing them validity only as auxiliaries of the major players on the stage of history).

Students who took to the streets against governments also subjected their own institutions to the same critical perspective. Universities shared the corruption of governments. The most obvious villains were science departments, colluding with the military in their research into ever more destructive weaponry, but attention was also attracted to manufacturers of war material who were invited to recruit graduates on campus (the Dow Chemical Company and napalm is probably the best known example). The universities did not apologize; they justified their activities, pleading the exigencies of large public institutions. They pursued a euphemistic "realism" that avoided the issues of concern to the demonstrators, concealing facts and dragging statistical red herrings across the trail of open debate. Students picketed recruiters from the military-industrial complex, occupied university buildings and also began an attempt at alternative education, the teach-in.

The once assumed posture of neutrality above the struggle and indifference to politics was no longer tenable in the universities. Students and universities had both to make a choice between moral principles and accountancy considerations; they were for justice or they were against it—and for the student movement no middle ground was conceivable. Choices were still made by individuals, but the terms were determined outside themselves, in the broad movement of politics. All choices had political consequences that went far beyond their own individualities; students were changing the world, freeing it from the corruption that had been made so evident. Liberalism was bankrupt;

“the movement” provided a spiritual home; “revolution” was the idea of the moment.

This “revolution” was not a reincarnation of the Popular Front internationalism of the 1930s. It was part of the sixties, of the general cultural upheaval that produced the Beatles, the miniskirt, sexual liberation, and the generation gap. The deference to authority and repression of the fifties gave way to a cheeky attitude and the assumption of personal liberty. Hierarchy crumbled, social class became indistinct, tradition lost the authority of long continuance. Age itself became a negative characteristic, until thirty seemed the upper limit of career viability for those professions most dependent on image and positions of traditional patriarchal authority were assumed by people scarcely halfway through their twenties. “You can’t trust anyone over thirty,” a catchphrase of the decade, acquired the truth of proverb. In England outward distinctions of class disappeared among students, surnames were obsolescent, the abandonment of insignia of rank in the Chinese People’s Army was much admired, everybody wore denim work clothes. Students and staff discussed the role of the intellectuals and cast themselves as Gramsci’s “organic intellectuals,” resolving at a stroke the contradictions of their relation to the working class movement. Althusser offered them a Marxism that was free from Soviet ties, untainted by the history of political parties, but still revolutionary in character: “in the hands of the Workers’ Movement, Marxist science has become the theoretical weapon of the revolution,” he said in the Foreward to *Lenin and Philosophy* (8). The statement is more hortatory than analytical, but it heals the breach between hand and brain; it implies that there is a revolution and “interpellates” the readers as part of “the workers’ movement” (however much this differed from the labour movement that had grown out of years of industrial organization).

Yet in Althusser’s own construction there seemed to be an inescapable contradiction between revolution and the university. He said “the State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus” (through the police, courts, prisons and army; *Lenin and Philosophy* 131). However, it is supported by ideological state apparatuses (e.g. the family, the media, religion, political systems, and education). Thus the dominant ISA of today is the educational ideological apparatus (*Lenin and Philosophy* 144–45). It organizes acceptance of the state and therefore is a preserver of the status quo, an agent of the forces of repression. How can the university then be revolutionary? The students wanted to construct a revolution but the tools they had were conservative—this was their dilemma.

The Problem of Literature

As an agent of change, literature had a number of serious drawbacks. There was the initial problem that in a world torn by violent struggle and seemingly on the brink of revolution literature was very much a secondary reality, and therefore of secondary importance. But there was also an internal problem in literary studies, located most immediately in the question of Literature. Because the university in which the teaching of literature took place was part of an ISA, the material it processed, the literature, must also have an ideological function. The literary canon was early on recognized as ideological in its construction, based on a mainstream that was designated as mainstream because of its ideological conformity. But what about individual works? No longer could they be presented as neutral instances of good taste or disinterested rational judgment. Every work was itself a repository of ideology, that “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (*Lenin and Philosophy* 153). Thus works of literature and Literature (the institution of literature, including the canon) were obscurers of the truth, anti-scientific therefore, and preservers of the status quo. And if “science” for Althusser was what was directly concerned with reality and therefore necessary to change the world, literature could not even pretend to real knowledge. The art experience is not *knowledge* of lived experience, he wrote in the letter to André Daspre, for “this knowledge is the conceptual knowledge of the complex mechanisms which eventually produce the ‘lived experience’ ” that appears in literature (*Lenin and Philosophy* 205).

Although it was science in Althusser’s system that had to provide the revolutionary tool, for people involved in the arts science often acquires a mystical aura and becomes dogma rather than science. Unlike the arts, which are usually pluralistic, science is intolerant (one theory drives out another). Althusser appeared to offer not simply one theory among several, but the “truth.” Truth here was not a matter of correctness or accuracy but of social acceptability. Althusser’s truth was not the treacherous, military-directed research of science departments but the rationality of virtue, tablets brought down from the mountain. Where the outrage of discovery, the realization that states and institutions have been lying, plays an important part in motivation truth becomes a matter of passion. The year 1968 demanded “revelation” rather than negotiated generalizations. Had English studies had more experience with theory had lecturers suffered less from the conventional English empiricism, they might have been able to disen-

tangle methods from conclusions, but in their naiveté they were vulnerable to proselytizing enthusiasms and "revealed truths." Althusser was, as it were, a name to conjure with.

When lecturers and students of literature discovered in the late sixties that they had been lied to (science departments were not the only villains); bitterness at their betrayal affected all their thinking. They had always been told that literature was true and good and beautiful, and they had been led to believe that these qualities were above considerations of self-interest and class. Those who lied to them about Vietnam, it seemed, had also lied to them about Literature: Literature *was* ideological. Lecturers, now radicalized, had themselves transmitted that ideology, and therefore they suffered from guilt as well as anger. What course of action was available to them as lecturers in English? In practical terms Althusser's science resolved their dilemma of an apparently conservative literary content in a radical context by focusing attention on the structures of literature and society instead of on works themselves. They looked at the function of Literature as an institution and were not concerned with the actual pieces of writing that compose it. Without the experience of theoretical discussion that might have enabled them to distinguish general principles from specific cases, they joined in a condemnation of Literature and the wholesale rejection of works of literature that this seemed to imply. How could anyone teach Hardy or Austen or Eliot or Joyce when they were riddled with the dominant ideology?

Traditional English studies had looked for significance in human relationships and the consequences of personal values. But this was humanist ideology, one of the contemporary "assaults on Marxism," and therefore had to be rejected. Humanism, "while it really does designate a set of existing relations, unlike a scientific concept, it does not provide us with a means of knowing them" (*For Marx* 223). The whole of traditional criticism was suspect because it was ideological. For the Althusserians, no *specific* practice remained legitimate; criticism lost its validity, critics their occupation. But the body of literary work did not disappear. Did it deserve to be ignored? Could it simply be dismissed? Or was there an acceptable scientific way of approaching it? The ideology in Shakespeare's plays, for example, could be avoided by mounting a course on "the uses of Shakespeare." But with hardly any examination of the plays themselves, students could do little more than reiterate the conclusions gathered from their lecturers about the importance of Shakespeare in British society. They had not enough familiarity with the plays to recognize the various transformations to which ideology subjected them. Students were often in the embarrass-

ing position of uttering judgements which, with so little specific experience of works, they could not themselves arrive at. But neither students nor lecturers were embarrassed: this purgation of specific text brought them from a state of sin to grace by expunging from their materials of teaching all the insidious ideological components. Countless lecturers, suddenly aware that they had been the purveyors of the dominant ideology, found redemption through abstraction. But once free of ideological Literature and literature, they had little left to teach beyond general principles, abstract structure, and the record of their own salvation.

Reaction to the heritage of the fifties provided another, perhaps unconscious, motivation for abstraction. In America, the atmosphere of economic expansion and political repression of the fifties gave more social approbation to the study of what was practically orientated than to reflective subjects; the sciences and engineering were valued much more than the arts. In England, although involvement in political controversy posed much less risk, a similar ivory tower character was encouraged by a traditional genteel aversion to practicality and by the diverting of the Leavisite mission (misguided but practical in orientation) into school teaching. English studies were defended by emphasis on a refinement, taste and subtlety that were superior to practicality. But in the sixties, in the wave of activism, these qualities lost their value and seemed irrelevant in the face of issues such as Vietnam. The demand was for social practicality, for changing the world. Althusser's scientific standpoint (different from that of traditional sciences discredited by their military involvement) offered a way of reconciling high culture with political reality. "But in political, ideological and philosophical struggle," said Althusser, "the words are also weapons, explosives or tranquilizers and poisons. Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word" (*Lenin and Philosophy* 24). Many students of literature and lecturers read this as flattering to themselves and could imagine their activity with words as truly revolutionary action (and, having learned their Marx through Althusser, they were not troubled by Marx's own dictum that "the weapon of criticism cannot supplant the criticism of weapons").

Without doubt, many students of English and their lecturers engaged in an active politics that actually jeopardized their careers. But some of the responses to change made under the aegis of Althusser served not to advance change but to contain it. Even though Althusser was not constructing a diversion from direct political engagement, if a word can be the 'site of struggle,' then what constitutes struggle alters

significantly, and academics found it increasingly attractive, as the fervour of the sixties cooled in the next decade, to raise their barricades in the mind rather than in the street.

Althusser's concept of theoretical practice contributed importantly to this retreat. "Theoretical practice falls within the general definition of practice," he wrote in "On the Materialist Dialectic" (*For Marx* 167). His own elaboration of the highly complex movement between the theory and the reality it theorized showed a serious involvement with problems of dialectical understanding previously neglected by most political activists. But his followers, consciously or not, found a comforting idealist interpretation of theoretical practice. Whereas "practice" had traditionally referred to activity in the material world and was the opposite of theory, now the two could be treated as the same thing and, for many Althusserians, theorizing became coterminous with practice. They ignored the difference between material and theoretical practice, to the point where one "activist philosopher" actually distinguished theory and practice by saying, "theory is thinking about something; practice is writing it down."

The concept of theoretical practice allowed professional intellectuals to regard themselves as politically active without requiring that they stir themselves; they could confront the ideology of the establishment and change the world from their armchairs. And since it was only science that could know reality, and science was abstract, no empiricist observation from material reality could be a valid objection to the conclusions of theoretical practice. Not surprisingly, even though it yielded conclusions of the purist radicalism, because they were abstract no MI5 or FBI agent and no university employer lost any sleep over theoretical practice. Theory can have a practical effect, certainly. "Theory, when it has gripped the masses," said Marx, "becomes a material force." But Althusserian theoretical practice, for the most part, remained idealist.

Althusserian idealism was intensified by reaction to remnants of the previous theoretical model of social revolution, 1930s-style Marxism. This was very often crude in its distinctions and reductive in its analysis. The conversion by some critics of literary qualities to questions of simplistic economics robbed literature of its characteristic and essential features (whatever positive effect its expression of political attitudes may have had). Althusser's theory, on the other hand, had a great complexity, and it presented literature in a highly mediated relation to the "real conditions of existence." It was impossible to demand simple answers from it, for there were too many determinants.

But for those empiricists in English studies who were newly trans-

formed into Althusserians, the theoretical complexity was perhaps not primarily an indicator of the power to achieve an accurate representation of reality. Rather, it had an aesthetic quality that distinguished it from crude radicalism and suggested the refinement traditionally associated with English studies, a subtlety that could be handled only by an elite.

The language and style of Althusser and the Althusserians fostered elitism. Difficult writing, i.e., incomprehensibility, was admired. This encouraged interminable chains of subordinate clauses, parentheses of translated phrases that suggested a particular sensitivity to the problem of precision, and endless pairs of inverted commas around simple words ("simple"?) which, implying a complexity greater than what was usually there, gave the feeling that a meaning existed beyond the reader's grasp. Althusserians made an aesthetic affectation of scientific style. Thus Althusser wrote in his essay "On the Materialist Dialectic":

I shall call Theory (with a capital T), general theory, that is, the Theory of practice in general, itself elaborated on the basis of the Theory of existing theoretical practices (of the sciences), which transforms into "knowledges" (scientific truths) the ideological product of existing "empirical" practices (the concrete activity of men). This Theory is the materialist *dialectic* which is none other than dialectical materialism. These definitions are necessary for us to be able to give an answer to this question: what is the use of a theoretical expression of a solution which already exists in the practical state?—an answer with a theoretical basis. (*For Marx* 168)

This style found numerous imitators, and some of them extended the feel of science by larding their writing with formulas (See, for example, Terry Eagleton in his *Criticism and Ideology*, 1976. The ideas were useful and retained some currency but the style was an affectation Eagleton soon rejected).

David Musselwhite, writing on *Wuthering Heights* in the second issue of *Red Letters*, presents an acute and interesting understanding of the ideological complexity of literary construction and reception. But his discussion is highly abstract and there is not enough specific treatment of the novel (i.e., of the material that would be common to all readers of the book) to make the generalizations accessible to anyone who does not already understand them:

Is not literature as an institutional practice designed to produce consensus, to guarantee and perpetuate an ideological hegemony?

<https://newprairiepress.org/sticl/vol18/iss1/4>
DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1336

Is not literature, in fact, no more than an ideological "opérateur" designed to ingest the unacceptable and regurgitate it as the acceptable? This . . . is given a degree of credence when one considers the way in which a novel like *Wuthering Heights* has been consistently read—or, more precisely, has read its readings.

In the end, of course, it is, quite simply, a question of reading. And in the beginning too. For *Wuthering Heights* is "about" reading and mis-reading, "about" the real conditions of that effectivity, "about" the alliance of literacy and lineage, "about" the acceptable and the unacceptable. The "about" is in inverted commas because these issues are not discussed or referred to as themes: they actually constitute the text: *Wuthering Heights* is this debate. Because *Wuthering Heights* is the thinking that must remain *unthought* it has remained unread. (3)

Readers who do not already understand the theoretical position are not given a way of arriving at that understanding. In the following issue of *Red Letters*, Francis Barker's discussion contribution offered a critique of Musselwhite's article:

Musselwhite's break with reflexive or expressive models of literature's relation with "society" in favor of the more radical decision to speak in terms of literature's self-constitution in a certain determinate relation to ideology and to other social practices, is clouded by the importation of categories undigested from discourses other than literary science, and his sociological account of the external, genetic, determinant factors governing the production of the text is minimized by his important but incomplete attention to *Wuthering Heights*—treating it as if it were largely detached from the historical and ideological forms which determine it. (10)

This is certainly philosophically muscular, but it becomes a caricature of itself. Barker's sense of radicalism is political in only a negative way, in moving the issue from something potentially relevant to the arena of actual politics to epistemological questions, to issues that are necessarily abstract. The language (the extract is only one sentence) is complicated, unnecessarily so because the complication is not demanded by the material but by the Althusserian aesthetic of style, and it displays

the stylistic tics of elaborated qualification, posing of alternatives, and grammatical subordination.

The difficult style of Althusser's followers produced a mysticism, which is elitist in character. This may in part stem from people in English studies accepting without question many of Althusser's amateur remarks on art and literature; e.g. "... the peculiarity of art is to 'make us see' (*nous donner à voir*), 'make us perceive,' 'make us feel' something which *alludes* to reality" (*Lenin and Philosophy* 204). Similarly, in discussing theatre, he says "for consciousness does not accede to the real through its own internal development, but by the radical discovery of what is *other than itself*" (*For Marx* 143). With the devaluation of examination of specific texts, there was, in effect, no reality that could be used to correct theory—it was mystified and unquestionable.

Conclusion

When the work of Althusser entered the world of English studies, the field was dominated by a *belles-lettrist* view of literature. Certainly there were Marxists and some other systematic critics, but the prevailing mode of literary study involved appreciation of the excellence of different authors seen through detailed study of specific works. There were judgements that could be agreed on and facts that were accepted as self-evident. The canon was regarded as a product of purely literary criteria. Althusser provided the philosophic perspective that gave articulation to the principles that were developed in the political activity of 1968: it was impossible any longer to regard English studies as self-contained or as "innocent." However muddled their expression of it, the ideas of Althusser helped lecturers and students to understand that not only were English studies influenced by ideology, but that the whole field was in fact shaped by considerations that were ideological. Althusser had said, "the great thesis" of Marx, Lenin and Gramsci was that "philosophy is fundamentally *political*," and it was his efforts that helped to drive into the academic conception of literature the recognition of the power of ideology and politics (*Lenin and Philosophy* 15). He made accessible to English studies the vital Gramscian concept of hegemony, and mechanisms that Marx explained in general terms, Althusser made more specific, bringing together terms that made them comprehensible to his readers. Concepts like Ideological State Apparatuses, despite their somewhat mechanistic quality, aided many students of literature who were not well versed in Marx to grasp more concretely the political shaping of culture and the interactive, reciprocal, i.e. dialectical process through which this occurred.

Where English departments once found theoretical treatment of literature completely indigestible, literary theory has now become an accepted part of literature courses (however awkwardly it may be treated). Where a canon of individual, worthy texts once composed the material of English courses, these courses have now accommodated the study of literary processes. Where once the study of English literature was understood narrowly, excluding almost all that was not British and all that was not specifically literature, English studies courses today encompass material from other literatures and cultures and are also concerned with modes of dissemination other than the printed word. Althusser was not the cause of this change but, without doubt, he was an agent of major importance.

As Gregory Elliott points out, much of Althusser, "its 'rational kernel'—has been assimilated into the culture, become part of the theoretical consciousness—or, often, unconscious—of left-wing intellectuals," and the changed character of English studies has been a lasting achievement (341). But the damage caused by Althusserians must also be recognized. Their arrogance alienated potential allies. They behaved as if there had been no theory before Althusser, or, in Elliott's words, Althusserian Marxism had "an intellectual exclusivity about it, betrayed by intimations of a 'theory degree zero' prior to its own emergence" (338). The social changes they advocated were to an extent defeated by their own conduct. The defects of new theory, like the problems of youth, are often mollified by practical experience. But Althusserians were disinclined to engage in interchange and were reluctant to listen to other arguments. Devaluing experience as "empirical," they grew older without growing wiser. As Lawrence Wilde says, "the Althusserians promoted an intellectual sectarianism which eventually collapsed under the weight of its own elitism and fatalism" (5).

As much as Althusserians changed English studies, in many significant respects it stayed the same. The materials were different, programmes altered, but even when dealing with literature that was the common currency of a shared culture, English studies found a way to transform it into something inaccessible to common experience and to make it exclusive. As the surge of populism of 1968 receded, Althusserians reconstructed the ivory tower (giving it of course a much longer name); they withdrew from the world of material practice to a higher truth and themselves replaced the old elite. This left English studies largely where they had been—isolated, exclusive, insisting on the separation of life and art. The true, the good and the beautiful remained—but they had been made abstract.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. 1969. London: Verso, 1986.
- _____. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: NLB, 1971.
- Barker, Francis. "Wuthering Heights and the Real Conditions." *Red Letters* 3 (1976): 10-11.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. London: NLB, 1976.
- Elliott, Gregory. *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*. London: Verso, 1987.
- Musselwhite, David. "Wuthering Heights: The Unacceptable Text." *Red Letters* 2 (1976): 3-5.
- Wilde, Lawrence. "Louis Althusser." *Red Letters* 28 (1991): 4-5.